love is not for the impatient by writeyourheart

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“Don’t be stupid, Mike. Love is stupid. Love destroys, and it hurts, and it turns people to weaker, shrunken versions of themselves.”

After Ted cheats on Karen, Mike finds himself fearful of both his his feelings for Eleven and what it means to be in love.

love is not for the impatient

Her screams were like bombs. Loud, bold, frightening and sudden.

"*How fucking could you?"*

Mike's eyes flew open at the sound, a small gasp escaping his lips, his body shifting slightly within the warmth of his blanket.

"Karen, you need to relax, you're gonna wake the kids." His dad's voice was steady and smooth like a moving wave, almost quiet enough for Mike not to hear him.

Almost.

"Oh, because *now* you care about the kids!" His mom's voice was shaky and raspy, like nails against a chalkboard, too loud to ignore.

He wished he could.

His parents fought all the time. In the kitchen as Mike remained in the basement. In the living room as Mike faked his studies in the dining room. In their own bedroom, as Mike begged for sleep to find him in his.

It rarely ever did. Not with the sound of their voices; unnerving and itchy, causing his blood to boil within his veins.

But it was never *this* loud. Never this piercing. Never enough for them to wake Holly. But tonight was different.

"You lied to me!" *Boom.* Another bomb. It exploded throughout the house, worse than the other one, turning Mike to burning, dancing, orange-coloured flames. He felt his heart throb within his chest with a foreign anxiety. This was *too* different. His mother was never this loud, never this angry. Never this hurt.

"Karen," was all Mike heard. The steadiness was still there, but there was a sudden unfamiliarity behind it. At first, Mike had mistaken it

for softness. But it wasn't softness. Ted's voice was small and guilty and it extinguished Mike's flaming body, reducing him to ash. "Karen, I'm sorry, all right. *I'm sorry*."

"Sorry doesn't change what you did." Mike felt his throat dry up, his body went still under the thick, cotton covers of his blue. The heat radiating from within his blanket was gone and was replaced by an icy coolness. *What had his father done?* He pretended as if he didn't already have an idea, pushing the concept away within the depths of his head, tying it down so that it wouldn't come back up.

"I was drunk." The concept unchained itself, wandering back to Mike's thoughts, hovering high enough so Mike couldn't grasp at it.

"That's not an excuse." The bombs were gone; but a pouring rain had replaced them. Her sobs were enough to turn Mike to stone.

Was Nancy awake? She had to be.

"What do you want then, Karen?" His father asked, slight anger in his raising voice. Despite the closed door of his bedroom, he could see them in his mind, facing each other in the hallway. His mother's tear-streaked face and shaking form, his father's outstretched hands and whiskey flavoured breath. "How do you want me to fix this?"

There was desperation. Mike had never heard it that boldly in his father's voice before. A slight fear found him now, burying himself deeper under the blankets, his breath growing heavier and his hands clutching the sheets with white knuckles. *2:48 AM,* the digital clock on his nightstand read. The numbers sent a green hue throughout his dark room, illuminating the walls, the silver moonlight hidden from the large window drapes.

"I want you to have never slept with that *whore*." The words stung like a bee across Mike's body. He had tried to avoid the idea, to act as if it were impossible, but he knew. It was always there, lingering and wandering throughout his head, whispering and tempting, begging for Mike to pay attention to it.

Mike never did.

Perhaps that was why when the words hit him, they felt as though they were physically shoved to his chest.

“Karen—”

“No.” Her voice was the steady one now. “Get out.”

“Wha—”

“You heard me, Ted. *get out of my house*.”

“*Your* house?” Mike felt his blood go cold at the slight, malicious, chuckle that fell from his father’s mouth as he spoke his words.

“*Get the fuck out!*” *Boom.* Another bomb. The entire house shook. The entirety of Hawkins shook. The entire world shook. The steadiness was gone. It disappeared, all together, disintegrating within the air like smoke.

It was at the sound of the front door banging shut, the sound of his mother’s shattering sobs, the sound of Nancy’s hurried footsteps, and at the sound of his pounding heart that Mike realized nothing in his family would be steady for a long time.

When he found her the next morning, she was sprawled on the couch in the living room, strands of tied hair fell to her face in thick pieces, hiding the dried-up tear streaks he knew were there. She was illuminated by the rising sun that crept in through the open windows, her hair nearly golden and her silky, silver robe tinted a slight orange.

Mike grabbed at the woolen blanket that was folded on the *Lay-Z-Boy*, resting it over his mother, his hand lingering gently against the warmth of her arm.

“Hey,” Nancy whispered softly from behind him, the suddenness of her voice nearly frightening Mike. “Don’t wake her up.”

“I wasn’t,” Mike retorted sharply, yet his words were merely a whisper. He turned to look at her from where she stood in the doorway. She seemed older than she was. Her arms, tightly crossed

against her chest, her unruly chocolate curls framing the edges of her face, and the dark circles persistent from underneath her eyes were all trying to convince Mike into believing that his sister had aged ten years in the span of one night.

“I was just—I don’t know— making sure she wouldn’t get cold, I guess.” Where Nancy aged, Mike grew younger. His voice was small and uncertain. Unrecognizable. He sounded vulnerable. Scared, even; like a little kid waking from a nightmare.

Nancy’s eyes softened at his words, her hands falling from her chest and resting hesitantly by her sides as she gazed at the floor. She still looked older, but there was a vulnerability she radiated, like Mike.

“Come to the dining room,” she murmured quietly, barely audible. Mike moved with reluctance, his eyes darting from his mother’s sleeping form to the doorway, as if unsure whether or not he should leave her here alone. Even though she was asleep, he couldn’t help but feel like it was wrong after what had happened last night. He still heard her screams in the depths of his head, echoing through him. It made him sick.

“You should go out today.” Mike raised his eyebrows at her words.

“What?”

“Go out,” Nancy repeated, shoving a plate of Eggos into his face as he sat at the table. He shoved it back. He wasn’t hungry. “Go do something. You’ve got friends.”

“I can’t leave. Not after last night.” Nancy’s lips thinned slightly, shoving the plate back to him.

“That’s what I’m here for.”

“I want to be here, too.” The plate sat flatly in front of Mike, but he didn’t look down at it. “I wanna help.”

“Mike, you weren’t even supposed to hear what happened,” Nancy declared, her jaw shifting slightly and her words growing louder. Mike felt her discomfort, even from across the table.

“They were so loud.” The vulnerability was back. And it was unavoidable. There was a lingering silence as the air in the room grew thin, and dry, Mike forcing tears away from his eyes as best as he could. He knew Nancy was doing the same. She was blinking too much, too fast. “I always hear them anyway, even when they aren’t that loud.”

“Me too,” was all she said. And the silence found them again.

Mike’s eyes moved from his lap to the table, the round Eggo staring up at him, beckoning his growling stomach. He was hungry, but didn’t *feel* hungry. There wasn’t much he felt right now. A dullness loomed over him, thick and grey like smoke within the air, clouding and fogging up the rest of him.

“If you won’t eat that, I know who will,” Nancy pointed out delicately, her words quiet and nearly timid. Mike felt his face flush at the thought of El. Usually, she was the first person he’d confide in. But this was different. He didn’t even want to talk to her at all right now, he realized. It was odd, the feeling. Unfamiliar, too. But he didn’t fight it.

“She’s busy today,” Mike lied. “Doing something with Hopper.” Nancy nodded gently, though he knew she didn’t believe him.

“Jonathan?”

“He’s busy, too. Helping Joyce with something.” Their lies were trash. But they both understood why lying was necessary right now.

Mike didn’t want to see El. He didn’t want to hear the sweetness of her voice, or feel the softness of her curls, or gently press the back of his hand against the warmth of her cheek. He didn’t want to experience the feelings she handed him, so freely, so willingly. If he was with her, feeling that swirl of sparks within his stomach was inevitable. If he wasn’t with her, it was still there, lingering and echoing in the pit of his belly and radiating to the core of his heart. But he could push it away, if he tried hard enough, though it never stayed away for too long, always finding its way back to him.

It was never a bad thing before; the feeling El gave him. But today, it

was haunting and threatening and Mike felt as though it could destroy him entirely.

Today, every good feeling El handed him was frightening.

"Michael," Karen slurred, her arms outstretched to him as she pressed herself drunkenly against the mattress of her bed. "Get me another glass of wine, would ya?" Her fingers found his cheeks, gently pinching at his skin.

"You've already had three glasses, Mom," Mike muttered, gently swatting her hand away from his face. "And it's getting really late." Her eyes widened from their drunken haze, her body shifting upwards in a swift motion, leaving Mike slightly shocked as she pressed both hands on either side of his arm.

"You're so good," she murmured drunkenly, her smile wide and eerie, illuminated by the moonlight that crept in from her bedroom window. "So much better than your father, Mike."

Mike stilled, unsure what to say, what to do. It's been three days, and already, four wine bottles sat empty on the kitchen counter.

"Thanks," Mike said gently, pressing on her shoulders so she would move back against the bed. She swayed with ease, falling on her back and nearly dragging Mike down with her, her hands steadily gripped on his arms.

"You're *too* good," she claimed, looking directly into his eyes. He could barely see from the darkness of the room, the moonlight not strong enough to accentuate her features, but rather soften her. "You're kind, and open to the world. Open to people."

Mike's eyebrows furrowed. God, she was so *gone*. His lips opened to say something, but she cut him off before he could, her hands moving from his arms to each side of his face.

"Open to *love*." The words escaped her mouth with a hiss, disturbed and nearly evil. Her face contorted, her featured scrunched and lines apparent on her face, noticeable even within the dimly lit moonlight. "Don't be stupid, Mike. Love is stupid. Love destroys, and it hurts, and it turns people to weaker, shrunken versions of themselves."

"Mom, you're dru—"

"Love opens you up, it exposes you. And being open means being vulnerable, Mike."

Mike's eyebrows knotted together, shaking his head. But he listened to her words anyways.

"And when people notice you're open, and you're vulnerable, they ruin you. Even if you've spend nearly twenty years together, married, had three kids, bought a house on a *motherfucking* cul-de-sac. They throw stones and pick at your heart until it shatters, until you're broken beyond repair, until you're nothing but a mess and a ghost of who you used to be—"

"Mike." Nancy's voice flooded the room, cutting off Karen and grabbing Mike by his shoulders from behind him. "I think you should go to bed now, it's late. I'll handle it from here, okay?"

Mike nodded somberly, but all he heard in his mind were his mother's words. *Love opens you up, it exposes you.* He released himself from Nancy's grip and moved to his own room with an aching quietness.

Love is stupid. He sank to the floor, pressing his back against the door he closed with gentleness. His room was dark, and the moonlight was still hidden by the drapes. His skin was tinted green by the colour of his clock, and his hands shook against his knees. His whole body shook, his knees pushed up to his chest and his arms snaking around his legs, curling into himself.

"*Mike?*" His *Supercom* was quiet, even throughout his noiseless room. "*Mike, are you okay?*"

Love destroys. He knew she was watching him. He wonders how much she saw, how much she heard. He hopes it isn't much.

"*Mike, can you hear me?*" Her voice is sweet and smooth, even through the sharp noises of the radio. His stomach twists.

And it hurts.

"Go away, El," he says with a voice that's deep and ragged and barely even his. "Just go away, stop watching."

"*What?*" She sounds so innocent, so confused. It nearly breaks his heart. "*Why? What's going on, Mike? It's been three days. I wanted to make sure—*"

It turns people to weaker, shrunken versions of themselves.

"Get out!" He yells, his words shaky and hallow and he has to swallow to keep from sobbing. "Go away, I don't want to talk, okay? I don't want to talk to you!"

He hears the radios static, and the softness of her unsure breathing on the other line until he doesn't anymore.

When people notice you're open, and you're vulnerable, they ruin you.

He hides his face in his knees, in case she's still watching him, so that when he bawls, she doesn't get to see.

When Jonathan shows up the next day, a box of popsicles in one hand, and flowers in the other, Nancy kisses him like he hung up the sun in the sky for her, and he looks at her like she assembled the clouds. Mike watches in slight disgust from inside the house, gazing at them from the window.

He guesses his mother didn't give Nancy the same speech that she gave him. Or she did, and Nancy didn't care, because she was stubborn and hard-headed, as their father would say. Mike was, too, but he knew his limits.

Lately however, his limits were blurred and dazed and they shifted, never as still and obvious as they used to be. They were like a physical line, white and bold like the ones on the highway. But now, it was like Mike needed glasses to see them properly.

When the phone rings, Mike contemplates not answering. But then it'd wake Holly from her nap, and Karen from hers, and Mike decides those are two problems he'd rather not deal with.

"Hello?"

"Mike!" Dustin's voice is shocked, as if he weren't expecting an answer. "Dude, where've you been? It's the second week of Summer and you're already backing out on us!"

"I've just been busy," Mike explains, twirling the cable around his index finger anxiously.

"Busy?"

"Yeah."

"With what?" He sounds as though it were impossible for Mike to have other plans and occupations than his friends.

"Stuff," Mike mutters.

"Stuff?" Dustin repeats.

"Yeah, stuff." Mike's eyes widen with a sudden realization. "Why do you keep repeating everything I'm saying? You're not alone, are you?"

The line goes silent, and Mike can hear faint whispers in the background, a small gasp that sounds too much like Will's and a shushing that sounds too much like it came from Lucas' mouth.

“What the hell, Dustin?” Mike accuses, anger building up in his voice. He didn’t want to deal with them right now. He didn’t want to deal with anyone.

“Don’t ‘what the hell’ me, Mike!” Dustin retorted with annoyance. “You’re the one who’s been AWOL on us! We just wanna hang out, dude. The whole party. Together.”

“I told you,” Mike says, pronouncing each word with clarity, as if Dustin were a little kid. “I’ve. Been. Busy.”

“All right, fine, you’ve been busy.” It almost sounds like he’s given in, like he’s going to hang up. But he doesn’t. “So, can you come to the arcade today?”

“I don’t kn—”

“No bullshit, dude,” Dustin’s voice was strong and determined, and even through the phone it was like he could see him, arms crossed on his chest and his chin held high. “Friends don’t lie, right?”

Mike sighs, closing his eyes and pressing his forehead against the wall. It’s cool against the warmth of his skin.

“Yeah,” Mike whispers. “I’ll come.”

The arcade is loud and lights flash from wall to wall, illuminating people’s faces with bright neon colours. The AC is strong too, blaring across the room to keep the crowd of kids and teenagers cool from the unbearable Summer heat.

He finds Lucas seated by Max at a table, a slushie in both their hands as they share a small giggle. Mike swallows, and thinks of El. Her

chocolate curls, her soft hands, her calm voice, the strength she carried like a second heart.

He misses her.

Love is stupid.

He shouldn't.

"Hey, Wheeler," Lucas waves him over when he sees him, high fiving him as he approaches. "Long time, no see."

Mike sits by him, his arms pressed against the table. "Yeah. Just been busy. You know how it is."

"Can't say I do," Lucas replies, but it's not harsh or menacing. His words are soft, sympathetic even. Mike doesn't understand why. Before he can answer, he feels hands pat against his back.

"Wheeeeleeeeerrrrrrrr!" Dustin cries, slurring. He sounds like his mother after she drinks, but more energetic. "You're not dead! It's a damn Christmas miracle!"

"It's almost July," Max answers quickly, her eyebrows shooting upward and the bottom of her long hair resting against the table.

"That's what makes it even *crazier*." Will giggles from behind him, and it's the first time Mike he notices he's even here. He's been so quiet compared to the others. He always is, but this is uncomfortable.

Mike realizes they're all acting odd, really. Dustin's always enthusiastic, but never this much. Max never stares at him for longer than she should, but she is today. And when Lucas laughs at Dustin's jokes, he's laughing too hard, too loudly.

"We called El but she said she couldn't come." He barely heard Lucas over the clump of thoughts in his head, trying to puzzle everything together. "Said she was 'busy.'"

Like a lightbulb goes off in his head, Mike suddenly remembers Jonathan is Will's brother. And then, he remembers Jonathan kissing Nancy outside today. And then, he understands.

They all know.

“You guys know.” He doesn’t sugar-coat it. “You guys know what happened, don’t you?”

The energy around them fades, dying down quickly as their overly-forced smiles fall to slight frowns. Mike feels his blood boil from within his veins, his breathing growing heavier as an anger fuels inside his chest.

It’s Will who speaks first, quiet and timid and Mike is taken aback when he presses his hands against the back of his. “We’re really sorry, Mike. About your parents.”

Mike doesn’t move away, he’s frozen, still unaware of what’s going on.

“Yeah,” Lucas murmurs. “It’s gotta suck.”

They’re all looking at him now, pity in their eyes. He knows they don’t mean it. He knows they wanna help him, they wanna make sure he’s not hurt, that he’s okay. This was the whole plan; to distract him, to make him have a good time.

But even if he didn’t bring up his parents, how could he? The thought of his mother’s drunken words and his father slamming the door shut still lingered over his shoulder like dead weight. It was impossible to ignore.

Still, despite acknowledging their good intentions, he snapped.

“Yeah, it fucking does suck, okay? It sucks fucking ass. And now my Mom’s a drunken mess, and my dad’s the scum of the earth, and despite the fact that ‘love *destroys,’* Nancy’s naïve and still sucks faces with Jonathan on the sidewalk!” He pauses, breaths in, ignores the shocked look on their faces and people who’ve turned to look at him, and continues. “And now every time I think of El I just feel like hiding and cowering into myself, even if I miss her, because love ruined my mom and I don’t want it to ruin me, too!”

He turns to the door when he’s done, unable to stare at their

faces for any longer. He just wants to leave, to run away, to hide in his basement for the rest of his life so that nothing bad can touch him again. But instead, he moves towards the back of the arcade, pressing his back against the wall and crying into his hands.

They throw stones and pick at your heart until it shatters, until you're broken beyond repair, until you're nothing but a mess and a ghost of who you used to be.

"Hey."

"Go away."

"You know you'll have to do better than that to get rid of me. If I was gone that easily, I'd have left the first time you said it."

Mike unravelled his face from his hands, his eyes squinting from the setting sun, falling on Max's sun-burnt face. Her hair was bold within the sunlight, burning orange meeting burning orange.

"Forgot your sunscreen?" Mike teased, a small smirk against his lips as he pointed to her face and shoulders.

"First rule of being a redhead," Max said, "is to never go outside without sunscreen on. Especially in Summer."

"Guess you're a bad redhead then," Mike chuckled. "Can't even follow your own rules."

"Yeah, guess so." Max pressed her back against the wall next to mike, offering him a wrapped piece of gum from her pocket. He grabbed at it, popping it into his mouth and chewing onto it with harshness. It didn't take too long after El came back for Mike to realize that Max was pretty cool. She was funny, and smart, and her D&D campaigns were *crazy*. In a good way.

“You know,” Max began, cutting off their awkward silence and popping the bubble she’d made with the candy flavoured gum, “lots of parents seem to stop loving each other after a while.”

Mike’s face shifted, his eyes moving from the sun to Max’s profile. She was looking into the sky, watching the sun set, creating an orange-pink hue.

“I mean, obviously not all parents fall out of love,” she continues. “But Will’s parents aren’t together anymore, and neither are Dustin’s and, y’know, my parents aren’t either.”

Mike doesn’t speak. He doesn’t know what to say. And really, it doesn’t matter, because Max keeps talking.

“And then there’s Lucas, and his parents are together. But that’s like —what? A three to one ratio.”

“Four to three,” Mike adds for good measure, though he’s unsure of the state of his parent’s relationship. Right now, he thinks he knows where it might be headed.

“Right.” Max sighs, breathing in as the cool wind hits them. It’s refreshing compared to the humid, Summer air.

“No offence, Max,” Mike began, a slight chuckle on his lips. “But you’re just making love sound even worse.”

“That’s ‘cause you didn’t let me finish, dumbass,” she giggled, shoving him playfully. “Maybe everyone falls out of love because they just weren’t meant to be together in the first place.”

“Max, that’s just silly.”

“Is it really though?” Max questions, her eyes still set on the sky. “People like to rush into things. Everyone wants true love, but no one wants to wait for it. So, they just hop on anyone who seems remotely alright and who wants just as many kids as they do, and call it love, even when it’s not.”

“Love sucks when you’re impatient,” Max added. “But Mike, it’s different for you. You and El— You guys aren’t like everyone else.

You've been through so much shit. You knew her for like, a week, and then called her every day for a year until she showed up again. You're not impatient. Real love makes you patient."

Mike chewed at the inside of his lip, not knowing what to say. The butterflies in his stomach were coming back quickly, bumping into each other as they flew around. He felt some linger, pressing their wings against his heart, allowing it to skip a beat.

"You and El could be seventy years old and you'd probably still love each other as much as you do know, if not even more."

"Hey, who ever said I was in love with her?" Max's eyebrows raised, her whole face radiating with '*seriously*?' It was as if Mike's love for El was the most obvious thing in the world. Maybe it was.

"You're pretty smart, Mayfield," Mike chuckled, nudging her shoulder with his.

"I know," she teased, nudging him back. "And, uh, I don't know exactly what your mom said about love, but just remember that she's in a bad place right now. She's speaking from her pain."

"Thanks Max," he said quietly, barely audible against the light whistle of the wind. But, still, she heard him.

"Anytime." She was looking at him now, smiling, and he was smiling back. Yeah, becoming friends with her was a good idea, after all.

"Oh, before you go," Max called out as he took his backpack, ready to leave. "I think there's someone you should talk to. Someone you've been avoiding."

"Already a step ahead of you." And with that, he grabbed his bike, the sun slightly blinding him, turning him orange, and tried to remember how to get to El's cabin.

By the time he arrived at the cabin, it was getting darker out. The sky was a summer purple, and the breeze sent shivers up Mike's bare arms. Hopper was at work at his hour, but Mike knew there was a secret knock. He just didn't know what it was.

He didn't know what to do; knocking might get him killed, especially if she had no idea who was on the other end. And it's not like he could just knock on her window like she *didn't* have telekinetic powers that would send him flying backwards into a nearby tree.

But he wanted to talk to her—he *needed* to talk to her.

Walking up the steps, he sucked in a breath and prayed to anyone—anything— that'd listen. He curled his fingers into a slight fist, his knuckles inches away from the door, preparing to knock.

Before he could though, the door swung open, and on the other side was El. A tired El.

Her curls were big and messy, messier than usual, jumbled around her head, certain strands falling to her face with carelessness. She was dressed in some oversized red hoodie and black sweatpants that engulfed her. Her eyes were red-rimmed, as if she'd been crying. Mike wondered if it was because of him.

"Leave," was all she had to say for her to answer his question. "Go away."

"El—" The door slammed in his face, nearly hitting the tip of his nose. Sighing, he banged his hands gently against the door, knowing she was still there, leaning against it.

"El, I'm sorry, okay?" The wind whistled in his ear, even when he pressed it against the cabin door. He couldn't hear her. But he knew she was there, behind it, pressing her ear against it as well. "Let me explain myself. Please El, just let me tell you why—"

The door opened as quickly as it closed, his body tumbling forward at the sudden loss of support, his head almost banging onto

El's until she caught him, her hands on his shoulders.

Her touch was warm, but the uncomfortable kind, like the sticky summer heat. It was soothing, and sent tingles down Mike's spine.

At the sight of her, he was on fire, and the touch of her, he melted. It was always this way. He hoped it always would be. "El."

Her hands fell from his arms, and Mike felt his teeth clench at the loss of contact.

"Hurry up," she muttered, looking away from him, her eyes meeting the floor. "Hopper's gonna be home soon."

Mike didn't hesitate. "Were you watching me a few nights ago? It was really late so I doubt that you were."

"When?"

"About four nights ago—or three—God, I don't even know anymore," he mumbled. Everything felt longer than it was. The days passed by, stretching out into what felt like years, the sun never setting until Mike had cried at least once. "It's just—something bad happened, okay? You'd know what it was if you saw."

"Well, I didn't," she huffed, but there was a lack of annoyance and slight worry behind her tone of voice, barely noticeable, but still, it was there.

"My dad—he lied to my mom," Mike explained, his voice frail and vulnerable. *Love opens you up, it exposes you. And being open means being vulnerable, Mike.*

El looked up from the floor, her eyes flooded with confusion and concern. "But friends don't lie."

"Exactly," Mike continued. "And this—this is even worse because they're more than friends. They're married and they're supposed to love each other in that *special way*." It's how he had explained it to her, when she had asked to know the difference between friends who didn't kiss, and friends who did.

He'd explained a lot that day. What love was; every type and version of it. What relationships were; all sorts of them. He remembers leaving feeling far more exposed than he ever had because of all the questions El had asked, and how when he told her what romantic love was, both their cheeks flushed and burned at their skin.

"Supposed to?"

"Sometimes, people can fall out of love," Mike explained timidly, his hand rubbing at the back of his neck as El's eyes gazed at him with question. "Or maybe, they just weren't in love to begin with."

"But aren't you supposed to marry someone you love," El asked him, the anger drained from her face, replaced by a genuine curiosity that allowed the butterflies in Mike stomach to flutter, their wings tickling his insides. "Someone you love…ro…man…tic…ally."

Mike nearly smirked at her cautious pronunciation.

"Yeah, that's what you're supposed to do," Mike replied, shrugging. "But not everyone follows the rules."

"Like when I ran away?" A small chuckle fell from his lips.

"Yes, El," he agreed, "like when you ran away."

There's a pause, as if she's determining whether or not she should do something. Her face is all scrunched up and her lips are tugging upwards and downwards with uncertainty, her eyes gazing back from Mike to the floor with reluctance.

For a moment, he thinks she'll hug him. But that's the optimist in him speaking; the part of him that aches for her warm arms around his neck, allowing him to escape the reality of the world. But instead, she speaks, murmuring her words. "How did he lie?"

"He, uh—" Mike and El had spoken about lots of things, and sex was one of them. But she didn't know how it worked; just the science of it — reproduction organs and babies. But she did know it was supposed to be with someone you love romantically. Still, Mike finds himself hesitant. "He had sex with another girl."

El's eyes widened, a wave of shock riding over her. "You're going to have another brother or sister?"

"No!" Mike's face contorted at the thought. "Well, hopefully not. Most likely not, at least."

El's eyebrows shot up. "Oh," she whispered. "But I thought people had sex to have babies?"

"Well, sex feels good," Mike explains, the words off and foreign on his tongue, but she'd have to learn eventually. "So sometimes, people do it, just because it's fun."

"Oh," El nodded slightly, though still obviously confused, the curls bouncing on her forehead. "But then they'll have a baby."

"No, there's ways to prevent that."

"How?"

"Look, El, that's not even the point," Mike insisted, waving his hand slightly in the air, as if brushing something away. "The point is that he wasn't supposed to do that, because when you love someone romantically, you're supposed to be loyal to them. And you're not supposed to lie to them like that. Because then, people get hurt. Really hurt."

"Your mom," Eleven whispered, looking up at him with a gleam of sadness. "She's hurt?"

"Yeah," Mike said. "She's hurt. And so, she's angry at him, because he hurt her. And she just—she said these things, about love and I guess it just scared me."

"What kind of things?"

"She said that love is dangerous." Mike's voice cracked. He pushed back tears. "And that it's stupid and it ruins people and leaves them broken. And I know that it's stupid of me to think that you would do that to me— that we would do that to each other, even—because I know we wouldn't, but I couldn't help but get scared of even just losing you, or just walking away like my dad and never coming back

ever again and—”

Her arms engulfed him, swallowing him whole and burying her face in the crook of his neck as tears ran freely down his face, his arms encircling around her middle instinctively. He was breathing in harsh, ragged breaths, and he felt himself sink into her, as if she were the only thing in the world that kept him from crashing.

It was haunting, looming over him; the fear of turning into his parents. He didn’t want to let go of El, to break her heart, or have his heart broken. Neither of them deserved it. But the thought of being left like his mom; drunk and dazed — or like his dad; lying and cheating — it made him sick, and scared. He wanted love. He *had* love. He just didn’t want it to go away, he didn’t want El to go away; to have love destroy him and turn him into a ghost of who he used to be.

“You love me,” El whispered, her warm breath tickling the skin at his neck. He could feel her smile against him.

“Of course I love you,” Mike gaped. “I’d be stupid not to.” He felt her grip around him grow stronger as a wetness made itself noticed against his neck. She was crying, too.

“I’m not leaving,” El assured, pulling away to look into his eyes, both of her hands on either side of his cheeks, her fingers tracing his freckles. “I’m not going anywhere ever again. Hopper doesn’t even let me leave this cabin!”

He laughed, and she matched it, both of their eyes wet with tears.

“I know,” Mike assured. “I’m sorry I was angry at you, I was just scared of my feelings. I’ve never felt anything this much before. That’s what made it so scary.”

“Sometimes, I’m scared, too,” El explained, and Mike’s eyes widened slightly. “I’ve never felt this way either.”

She smiled, and he smiled back, pressing his forehead against hers.

“I love you, too,” she beamed, pressing their lips together. She tasted like maple syrup and eggos, but still her lips were soft like rose petals

against his. He sighed into the kiss, realizing how much he missed her, even if it was only four days. It felt like forever.

“Promise?” Mike teased as the kiss ended, not letting her go, as if she’d disappear within thin air if he didn’t have a grip on her.

“Promise.” And suddenly, everything Mike’s mom had said about love disintegrated into the sky like smoke, floating up to the clouds, and hiding behind the stars.

Author's Note:

> Hope you enjoyed! This isn't one of my favourites because I think the ending is kind of weird? But it was also 2 AM and I wanted to finish so you gotta do what you gotta do.